

Notification system update

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Introduced in late 2019, South Central Alberta Regional (SCAR) Notification System is poised to continue to grow in 2020.

SCAR was created with the intent to provide residents with a more timely and consistent approach to emergency and communications in the region.

Born from a partnership between the Municipal District of Taber, Town of Vauxhall, Village of Barnwell, Taber/Vauxhall RCMP and the new South Central Alberta Rural Crime Watch Association (RCW), the initiative went live on Oct. 1.

“Our membership has been growing. We’ve had, as a partnership, some monthly meetings to keep up the momentum and keep in touch with each other. We have had the opportunity to look at some of the areas that we wanted to in regard to promotion so we are looking at ways of getting the word out to the public a little bit better. One of the big ones is coming up and it is tied directly to Rural Crime Watch and some of their initiatives in conjunction with SCAR. There are some really great synergies that will come out of that and we are looking forward to that,” said Bryce Surina, director of IT and GIS for the M.D.

Another influential force behind setting up the system was due to the incoming Rural Crime Watch association located in the region.

“Rural Crime Watch is an initiative that is going to provide the RCMP with a lot of different sets of eyes and ears out in the rural area,” explained Sgt. Gord Yetman.

“That is going to greatly enhance how we do our job. As part of the Rural Crime Watch, they used to have a system back in the day called Big Mouth. I think it was a DOS (disk operating system) system blasted out in a message to a large number of people, like a voice message. This is just taking that to the next level and it will allow us and the M.D. to get a message out to a very broad base of people in a very short amount of time. As far as the RCMP goes, we have had fairly good tests of it.”

Near the end of December, total members signed up for SCAR was in the 150 range.

While a discussion around how many members they ideally wanted signed up was brought up, they realized very early on having a set target wasn’t necessary.

“Having a target is really tough because our audience is very broad and it can be all over southern Alberta. We could set a target of 1,000 and it could be completely arbitrary because if all of a sudden there is interest in what is going on in south-central Alberta, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge or even Taber, whether it reflects the M.D.’s population or Vauxhall or Barnwell, it’s kind of just a number. We talked about (setting a target) and that’s not necessarily the approach we are taking. So, our approach is to continue to promote it and spread the word,” added Surina.

With RCW going full-steam ahead in early 2020, they expect those numbers to see a boost.

“Once we see the Rural Crime Watch group launch into their membership drive, I think that is when we will see a boost in the number of people registered because that will be part and parcel of their membership drive,” said Yetman. “Kudos to Kevin O’Grady who is at the helm there. Things are taking off and they are on schedule there at this point. It has been a long road but we have the right

people there. Things are taking off and we should see things taking off in January.”

While only having been in operation since the beginning of October, the benefits of the new system have been ten-fold for the partners.

“I saw the positives (of SCAR) during a train derailment. I got the SCAR notify message before I got the official call from my office. That type of notification is priceless. You have to be impressed by how quickly the messaging gets out there. With our weather event with black ice on Highway 3, we got that message out there quick and people were getting the message as they were going through the area. And even more so, if people were planning a trip into Lethbridge, if they are subscribed to the system, they get that message right away and they can tailor their driving accordingly,” stated Yetman, who also touched on releasing RCMP notifications through SCAR as well. “We are looking to get our press releases put on the (M.D. of Taber) website and we are looking to send out press releases as well via the system.”

The M.D. has also been highly satisfied with the program’s roll-out in late 2019.

“From a municipal perspective, we get good value out of the notification piece as well. Being able to push our notifications out consistently so people know and have a certain expectation level. So if you sign up for SCAR you get notifications from the municipality timely and when necessary, and then a weekly summary from the M.D. We are consistent with that and you can expect to get that regularly and stay informed. If you are a ratepayer and are interested in signing up for those particular selections, you get access to great information. Also, the Village of Barnwell and Town of Vauxhall have that same opportunity and they are gearing up for that as well,” said Surina. “We have had some great interaction and have had a great opportunity to reach out and talk lots. We talk about what’s working and what’s not working. We just get some great back and forth and that has been a great experience. It spins off into emergency services as well. We have the fire service here so we talk about publishing to this application and it spins off into other areas for the municipalities and RCMP. We all deal with emergencies and how they roll out. This can be viewed as another tool in the toolbox.”

The partnership between all the municipalities and RCMP was the key piece in setting up the notification system.

“We have had some great interaction and have had a great opportunity to reach out and talk lots. We talk about what’s working and what’s not working. We just get some great back and forth and that has been a great experience,” said Yetman, who also gave kudos to the work Surina has put in.

“I think this program has benefited from having a champion like Bryce. He has certainly grabbed the bull by the horns and ran with the whole thing so I would say that is why where we are today.”

The Town of Barrhead was looked at as one of the first municipalities to deploy this kind of system and the SCAR team has continued contact to trade information back and forth.

“They were really instrumental in getting this program going. We certainly reach out to them and learn from each other. They were great in looking forward and seeing the value of this program,” explained Surina.

Residents in the region can sign up for SCAR at scarnotify.ca.